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SENSITIVE
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STATE FOR SCA/FO, SCA/A, S/CRS
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SUBJECT: ELECTIONS ON THE BORDER: A SNAPSHOT FROM KUNAR

REF: KABUL 2416

¶1. (SBU) In the northeastern province of Kunar, a patchwork of safe and increasingly prosperous river valleys stitches together dry mountains and high defiles where al Qaeda, the Taliban, and other anti-government forces operate.

The hot, dusty, fly-blown capital of Asadabad is some 150 miles east of Kabul but only 7 miles from the border with Pakistan. In meetings September 21 with PRT officers, local leaders and elected officials talked about elections Kunar-style: local solutions that draw on traditional structures of authority and personal relationships. As voters, these representatives say Kunaris worry, first, about corruption, and, second, about security.

Improvising toward the goal

¶2. (SBU) Provincial Electoral Officer Shahjehan Sardari is a veteran of the 2004/2005 electoral cycle, and he is determined to deliver results again. "My uncle came to see me, to tell me to quit this job," he sighs. "It is so much work, the family is worried I will go crazy." Shahjehan ticks off the tasks he has accomplished in the run-up to voter registration on October 6: setting up his office; hiring provincial office staff; hiring and training civic educators and district field coordinators; coordinating with the security forces and the governor. On September 22 he and his staff will examine some 200-odd applicants for the jobs in the voter registration centers.

¶3. (SBU) Shahjehan remains concerned, however, that his province's voter outreach will be too little and registration sites too few. "There are people living in the forests" on the high slopes in Kunar. "They should know about elections." Shahjehan is also worried that women and the elderly will remain disproportionately disenfranchised. Provincial Council Member Touraj is blunt: "Where al Qaeda is, it will be harder for women to vote."

¶4. (SBU) To solve these problems, Shahjehan says he has secured the agreement of Independent Elections Commission (IEC) field operations chief Raheem Siyal to use more mobile registration teams (reftel), in addition to the one already planned for Asadabad. The security forces opposed Shahjehan's earlier suggestion to deploy some registration

center staff as two-person teams to remote areas with security guarantees from local leaders. A sampling of six of 32 District Field Coordinators (DFCs) confirm, however, that they have been laying the groundwork for mobile and fixed-site registration in their areas. "I organized three shuras already to solve these security problems," the DFC from troubled Manogai said. "In the valleys I can't reach because security is bad, I am working with my good contacts with the district governors." On September 20, the district governors from Manogai, Chapa Dara, and Watapoer confirmed that small "sub-teams" would be needed to reach remote villagers and women who might face family pressure not to travel to registration sites.

¶15. (SBU) PC Member Baber agreed with the need to secure the support of local communities. "The elections will be better organized and have less fraud if the electoral officials rely on local people," she said. She and fellow PC Member Touraj plan to meet with Kunar elders to persuade them to support women's participation. They will also reach out directly to "our sisters who could not vote last time."

Not like last time

¶16. (SBU) Interlocutors agree that security is a greater problem now than in the last electoral cycle. The director of "The Young" youth organization complains bitterly about the causes and sources of the present security situation in Kunar. "People come from Karachi and tell us what to do. But

KABUL 00002622 002 OF 002

why, I ask, do they not blow up Karachi and Saudi Arabia?" No peace, he says darkly, means no elections.

¶17. (SBU) More importantly, these Kunaris stress, the 2009 presidential and provincial candidates will face voters whose hopes have gone unmet. The nation was "proud" to choose a president and a legislature last time, the two PC Members agree. "I like my voter registration card (from 2004)," Touraj says. "It is very important to me." But even though women now have more access to education and jobs, "I will not run again," Baber states. "We have failed." To Baber, failure means requests to the central government went unanswered, corruption is endemic, and "foreign enemies" are exploding bombs and rockets.

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